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# **Business as Usual? The Global Political Economy of Childhood Poverty**



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# Introduction

We will have time to reach the Millennium Development Goals – worldwide and in most, or even all, individual countries – but only if we break with business as usual. We cannot win overnight. Success will require sustained action across the entire decade between now and the deadline. It takes time to train the teachers, nurses and engineers; to build the roads, schools and hospitals; to grow the small and large businesses able to create the jobs and income needed. So we must start now. And we must more than double global development assistance over the next few years. Nothing less will help to achieve the Goals.

Kofi Annan, July 2005

At the top of the list of Millennium Development Goals is the eradication of extreme poverty. Achievement of this goal is to be indicated, in part, by a 50 percent reduction in the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day. A recent UN report on progress towards realisation of the MDGs suggested that efforts in respect of this specific target have achieved only mixed success (United Nations 2007). While the proportion of the world's population living in extreme poverty may have declined, it still remains alarmingly high at an estimated one-sixth of the global total – the so-called 'Bottom Billion' (Collier 2007). In sub-Saharan Africa particularly, the change has been minimal: certainly too slow for the target date of 2015. Moreover, the scale of inequality in many locations has increased, in some cases sharply (Cornia 2004, Young Lives 2008). This has important implications not just for poverty as an objective phenomenon but also for the *sense* of impoverishment – an issue of serious consequence for societal stability and cohesion. Within the countries being studied as part of the research for Young Lives, notably Peru and Vietnam, poverty is becoming entrenched in tandem with impressive economic growth being recorded at the national level.

How then to evaluate the analysis of Kofi Annan quoted above? While expanding practical efforts and redoubling aid budgets may help, it is questionable whether this is sufficient. Annan's encouragement to 'break with business as usual' hints at deeper, more systemic change. However, he does not make explicit what might be entailed. This paper proceeds in the conviction that poverty, in general, and childhood poverty, in particular, are the product of complex and evolving forces that, in many parts of the world, appear to be increasing in their reach and scale. Such forces are bound up with thoroughgoing processes of social change. Expanding current efforts - including the cancellation of international debt - may have some positive effects. However, in order to ensure the eradication of childhood poverty, much more than this will be needed.

As I shall argue, the spread of dominant capital and the often enforced and sudden integration of nations into the global market have had significant and systematic consequences – qualitative and quantitative - upon the material conditions of children's lives. Tackling corrupt governance, poor use of resources, lack of technical sophistication, rampant disease and other such damaging phenomena are all unquestionably important endeavours (cf. Collier 2007). However, the resulting advances achieved may well be cancelled out in the absence of efforts to address the ill effects of a neo-liberalism that currently enjoys free rein throughout most of the world.

The dominant role of governments and big business in the US, EU and Japan in shaping the direction of the globalising economy is evident in ways that I shall discuss. However, it would be reductionist to assume that popular dichotomies of 'North'/'South' or 'developed'/'

'developing' offer more than a very rough basis for understanding the divisions that are central to the workings of global political economy. The reality, as Anthony Payne has explained, is far more complex. For example, within international negotiations around trade, finance and the environment, such divisions are increasingly hard to discern, with various, diverging positions adopted amongst both the powerful states and those at the other end of a 'crude spectrum' (Payne 2005: 233). Moreover, we need to remain mindful of the many millions of people within supposedly 'wealthy' countries that are currently living below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Rather than seeing their situation as a consequence of processes distinct from those that perpetuate poverty in so-called 'poor' countries, it is important to look for the ways in which the two may be products of the same fundamental processes, albeit playing out in different ways (see Katz 2004).

While the world's poor may be connected through the impact of the globalising economy, so too are the rich. Indeed, the connections here may be more literal given the ease of mobility enjoyed by the wealthy (in sharp contrast to the constraints on the poor resulting from ever more stringent border controls and immigration policies). Later in the paper I will consider specifically the ideology that sustains and is perpetuated by a highly mobile political economic elite: an ideology that has had particular consequences for the ways in which childhood poverty is conceptualised and addressed around the globe.

A further factor militating against the assumption of an obvious dichotomy between the 'West' and 'the rest' is the emergence of other economic powers beyond the members of the G8 and OECD. The most important player amongst this group – which includes India, Brazil and South Africa – is China. Aside from their important political economic role in East and South-East Asia, the influence of the Chinese government and Chinese corporations in many African countries is nowadays strongly felt: a phenomenon that will inevitably grow.

Having offered these various caveats, it is still reasonable, and indeed necessary, to consider the contemporary political economy of childhood poverty in relation to an entrenched inequality between wealthy, powerful states principally located in Europe, North America (plus Japan) and others, particularly countries in Africa and parts of Asia. Such inequality is evidenced and reinforced by the workings of global institutions such as the UN, the WTO, World Bank and IMF in which members of the G8 wield disproportionate influence. The power of these states – especially the US – is also felt to a considerable degree within negotiations over pressing issues such as climate change and global trade (Payne 2005: Chapters 7 and 8). Thus, this paper proceeds on the understanding that while the bifurcation of the world into 'Global North' and 'Global South' runs the risk of grossly oversimplifying many complex and evolving dynamics, it nevertheless remains important to consider childhood poverty in light of long-standing asymmetries of power. Such power relations – that retain a topographical dimension – continue to serve the interests of elites and nations in certain locations whilst marginalising, as a matter of course, millions of children and their families elsewhere.

The following discussion is divided into four sections. In the first I make explicit the conceptual basis for my enquiry. Attention is paid most particularly to the notion of 'political economy'. In order to account for the approach taken this section also explains some of the limitations in recent literature on childhood poverty. Sections Two and Three explore key shifts in thinking entailed in the pursuit of understanding of the political economy of childhood poverty that is properly mindful of issues of power. The first of these two sections offers a

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1997 UNDP *Human Development Report* it was claimed that 100 million people in the OECD countries were living below the poverty line (Cited in Payne 2005: 13).

view on how the construction of childhood as a social institution might be understood in light of the workings of political economy and how they intersect with ideology/culture. The third section reverses the perspective to explore the challenge of developing an approach to political economy that is mindful of children. The final section of the paper takes the key elements of the foregoing theoretical discussion and applies them in the articulation of an approach to exploration of childhood poverty that locates local experience in relation to global political economy. Social reproduction is the particular theme around which this aim is pursued.

# 1. Political Economy and History

... the official story of development... fails to acknowledge that the combined and uneven development of capitalism across the world itself produces, of necessity, extremes of inequality and pervasive poverty. Such poverty is not natural but social, and, insofar as it reflects historically particular social relations, it is neither permanent nor inevitable. Thus, development properly understood, must be viewed as a global process of the historical transformation of capitalism and beyond.

Julian Saurin 1996: 660

It is perhaps helpful to start by acknowledging the connection between the use of the word 'development' in respect of nations and economies and its use with regards to human maturation. Central to the dominant discourse of both child and socio-economic development is a notion of progress: of movement away from an undesired or lesser state towards full membership of a community – whether as 'adult' (in the case of children) or as 'industrialised'/'modern' (in the case of nations).<sup>2</sup> Traditionally dominant schools of thought in both development economics and developmental psychology have both posited a singular and universal trajectory towards the achievement of this goal of full community membership.<sup>3</sup> For both the 'child' and the 'underdeveloped' nation, achievement of this ideal future lies in a felicitous combination of nurturance by outside parties and appropriate effort by the protagonists themselves.

Missing or obscured by this approach to development (both of children and of societies) is the issue of power.<sup>4</sup> Dominant capital – working with and through political institutions – functions in a manner arguably ensuring that only a small elite within many countries can enjoy a life free of the shackles of poverty. No amount of local intervention by developmental agencies is a sufficient match for such constraining forces: a fact that may explain why these agencies and much of the international child rights lobby direct their energies at the more susceptible challenges associated with 'local culture' instead (Pupavac 2001; White 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer consideration of the connection between the emergence of developmental psychology and its relationship to capitalist expansion (in the form of imperialism and industrialisation). However, for more on this subject see Walkerdine 1984; Burman 1994; Cunningham 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am making a connection between modernisation theory in development economics and stage theory (associated with Jean Piaget and Laurence Kohlberg) in developmental psychology.

<sup>4</sup> See Kielland and Sanogo 2002 for an example of such analysis.

## The importance of history

Depoliticisation involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it. No matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticisation always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject.

Wendy Brown 2006: 15 (emphasis in original)

The antidote to a de-politicised, policy-focussed approach to childhood poverty can be summed up in one word: history. It is lack of attention to historical conditions that allows the perpetuation of a view of childhood poverty as a phenomenon that may be alleviated through technical measures. By contrast, situating childhood poverty in historical context can reveal that, while individual actions and institutional policies may make some short-term difference, such poverty is overwhelmingly a product of the workings of structures and processes operating over time in accordance with specific relations of power.

The challenge of building an incisive political economy perspective on childhood poverty is thus largely a challenge of history. This challenge relates not only to situating childhood – as a construction – within material history, but also to providing an historical, child-focussed account of economics – a field that, as Geoffrey Hodgson has asserted, ‘forgot history’ in the quest to develop a general theory of economic behaviour (2001). Moreover, we need to insist upon the specificity of historical experience of different societies and regions in the face of normative assumptions about a singular and universal trajectory of progress as manifest, for example, in the categorisation of countries as ‘underdeveloped’, ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ (Osborne 1992: 78). To quote Julian Saurin again:

... by uncovering the lives of subordinated peoples and collectivities, we may understand the more complex construction of world order and the particular experience of development and poverty. By so doing, we should be in a better position to address the questions ‘what is development’ and ‘what is poverty’, but also to understand how globalisation reconstitutes development and poverty...

(1996: 660)

The inseparability of politics from economics is central to the notion of political economy as employed in this paper. That is to say, I do not see politics and economics as two distinct fields but rather as two aspects of power, the workings of which are bound up in each other. Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler have argued against a dualistic or inter-connected view of politics and economics, suggesting that capital itself be understood not in terms of wealth (however defined) but rather as ‘a strategic, power institution’ (2002: 31). It takes no great imagination to envisage situations in which the acquisition and exercise of political power involves economic power in some form. Even without the direct purchase of political influence – as demonstrated, for example, in the huge donations made by corporations simultaneously to both main parties in recent US presidential elections<sup>5</sup> – access to or control of the media exercised by big business helps to shape public demand for particular governmental actions (Herman and Chomsky 1988).<sup>6</sup> As a result of such influence – direct or

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Schor 2004: 29

<sup>6</sup> Henri Giroux notes that in the US prior to 1996 no single firm could own more than 28 radio stations nationally. However, in that year the Clinton administration introduced legislation (the 1996 Telecommunications Act) relaxing such restrictions. As a result within less than a decade three corporations had gained control over access to ‘more than half the listening audience’ (2005: 46).

indirect – policy and even ‘national interest’ come to be defined in accordance with the interests of dominant capital (Stiglitz 2008).

Such understanding of the inseparability of economy and politics (or ‘society’ in some formulations) is widely shared. Nevertheless, it remains the case that powerful states and the international institutions that they dominate continue to operate as if the two were indeed separable, so that policy may be pursued in a supposedly neutral, interest-blind manner. Moreover, much of the recent influential theorising around poverty and its alleviation has also proceeded as if it were possible to consider economy and politics in discrete terms. For example, as Ben Fine has argued, influential theory-making by the World Bank and others around the issue of ‘social capital’ has proceeded on the basis that a non-social capital is also possible (Fine 2001). Currently influential authors such as William Easterly and Jeffrey Sachs demonstrate a similar proclivity in their recent writing. Easterly, for example, in a recent book responds to the suggestion by Sachs (Sachs 2005) that it is the ‘poverty trap’ that explains lack of growth in poor countries by arguing that bad government is more likely at fault (Easterly 2006: 37). He thereby also counters Sachs’ suggestion that a massive input of foreign aid is needed to move such countries out of poverty – the so-called ‘big push’. However, Easterly, like Sachs, sidesteps consideration of the workings of the global economy and the impact of neo-liberalism to treat economic and political power as if they were separable: ignoring the fact that the liberalisation of economies has commonly been achieved through government working together with corporate actors to overturn civil liberties, systems of accountability and democratic institutions.

Macro-economics as employed in the development of policy around poverty alleviation is rendered politically neutral by its claim to constitute science practice. As Alice O’Connor has observed:

[T]he idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been an article of faith in American liberalism... nowhere is this more apparent than when it comes to solving the ‘poverty problem’.

(2001: 3)<sup>7</sup>

Laws and policies ensuring de-regulation, privatisation, control or closure of unions, cuts in public spending, and tax breaks for those at the top end of the economic scale may be justified as a technical necessity. However, it should be apparent that such measures are inextricable from political interests, enabled by and further enabling asymmetries of power that function in tandem with a particular ideology. The consequences are plain to see: it has recently been estimated that the wealthiest 10 percent of the world’s adults (overwhelmingly male) own 85 per cent and the wealthiest one percent own 40 percent of global household wealth, while the poorest 50 percent (disproportionately female) own just one percent (Davies, et. al. 2006: 26). Such disparities appear to be growing as political economic power enables those at the top to consolidate their control over an increasingly large share of the world’s natural and human resources. There is, however, nothing inevitable about the processes that have resulted in such statistics on the distribution of global wealth. Rather, they are part of an historical trend that requires understanding as such if its negative consequences – in terms of childhood poverty - are to be countered.

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Harris 2007: 8

## The neo-liberal regime

The meeting of Western Allies at Bretton Woods just prior to the end of World War II created the foundation for the international economic order that exists today (Watson 2004: 8). Particularly since the 1970s an emphasis of this order has been upon the freedom of movement for capital unencumbered by government-imposed restrictions. The US government has played a determining role in such liberalisation (Nitzan and Bichler 2002: 61-62). Over the intervening years the extent of capital flow across national borders has grown cumulatively, with the result that citizens in many countries in the global South have been drawn increasingly into a globalised market as both workers and consumers. Moreover, the indebted governments of poorer nations have found themselves on the receiving end of measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund that have often required them to open up their economies to Western capital and to surrender a large degree of control over budgetary allocation, including to areas such as health and education. Like the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and other global institutions, decision-making and policies at the IMF reflect the influence of dominant nations and dominant capital working through those nations. For example, the US enjoys the privilege of sole veto over IMF policy (Stiglitz 2002: 12). Our consideration of childhood poverty must embrace such issues head on rather than continue to focus attention principally on the settings where poor children and their communities reside, as if causes may be found there, alone or in the main.

## The ideology/culture of political economy

The 1973 coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power in Chile heralded a major turning-point in economic policy globally (Harvey 2005; Klein 2007). Over successive decades governments around the world have dismantled the legal and administrative measures created to ensure the co-existence of capitalist endeavours with state involvement in welfare provision, employment protection and public ownership of key industries. Such co-existence was at the heart of the approach advocated by John Maynard Keynes in the 1930s in order to deal with the adverse effects of the Great Depression upon ordinary citizens in the United Kingdom and other Western nations.<sup>8</sup>

From the 1970s onwards this managed economy approach was increasingly rejected as meddling and sometimes portrayed as akin to communism by those who called for a complete liberalisation of economies in the name of freedom and democracy. The chief architect of this shift was Milton Friedman, an economist at the University of Chicago and an inspiration to a generation of economists who went on to assist various national leaders around the world in their efforts to remove all obstacles to the functioning of the market, while ensuring the protection of private property rights and the expansion of free trade.

Extensive consideration of the relationship of political economy to ideology/culture is not possible here. However, it is vital to bear in mind that no approach to economic policy – least of all that pursued by Friedman and his followers - is constructed outside of specific belief systems and culturally-informed understandings. The basic building-blocks of economic policy consist of time- and culture-bound assumptions about notions as fundamental as human nature, social relations and personal wellbeing. Of concern for this paper are the assumptions made by neo-liberalism that relate particularly and directly to children's lives. An

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<sup>8</sup> Writing this paper in September 2008 I am aware of the growing blame for the present financial crisis being attributed to free market policies introduced since the 1970s, especially de-regulation of the financial industry. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with the potential consequences of a possible rethinking of current economic orthodoxy for childhood poverty.

ideology of 'family' that vests this institution, however imagined, with the primary or sole responsibility for social reproduction is a particular feature of neo-liberal thought.<sup>9</sup> In the view of Jens Qvortrup, this ideology (or 'dogma', to use his term) promotes the view that 'children in our societies are parents', and in principle only parents', economic liability.' (1994: 16) Thus the argument that children should be considered as a public good (Folbre 1994; De Vylder 2000) is thoroughly eclipsed by the dominant discourse of self-sufficiency which provides a rationale, even an ethical argument, for withdrawing state support and compelling people towards self-reliance (or destitution) in the name of 'democracy' and 'freedom'.<sup>10</sup> The withdrawal of free basic services and the imposition of user charges that have been a common element of structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF should be understood in light of this ideological standpoint.<sup>11</sup>

Such valorisation of family self-reliance is a core element of 'laissez-faire' capitalist thought that finds its intellectual origins in the ideas of Adam Smith in the eighteenth century. However, Smith's vision included an emphasis on the importance of altruism. This he expressed in the opening sentence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), with the observation that 'there are evidently some principles in [man's] nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.'

It is questionable whether the current generation of free-market advocates have kept in mind Smith's call for altruistic action. The ever-increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor and the decline of the middle classes has been accompanied by the emergence of a class of highly mobile elites with few, if any, ties to specific locales or communities (Lasch 1995: 47). These are business people, international bureaucrats and technical experts (including economists) with the power to exert significant influence in various national and international political economic, and ideological/cultural institutions. Their common disconnect from locale has encouraged an outlook that Christopher Lasch has described as follows:

Instead of supporting public services, the new elites put their money into the improvement of their own self-enclosed enclaves. They gladly pay for private and suburban schools, private police, and private systems of garbage collection, they have managed to relieve themselves, to a remarkable extent, of the obligation to contribute to the national treasury. Their acknowledgement of civic obligations does not extend beyond their own immediate neighbourhoods.

(1995: 47)

Behind the rhetoric of efficiency and rationality issuing from institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, we should discern the mindset and influence of members of this new hypermobile elite. Their statements and policies should be considered in relation to an ideology of self-reliance combined with disinterest or disavowal of history. Indeed, it is a contention of this paper that the problematisation of the 'culture' of the poor as a major obstacle to the improvement of their children's lives – as evidenced in much of the

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<sup>9</sup> For a clear statement of this ideology see the website of right-wing US think-tank The Heritage Foundation [www.heritage.org/about/lfa/familyandreligion.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/about/lfa/familyandreligion.cfm)

<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, as Cornia points out, in the Soviet Union of the 1980s the state's extensive and paternalistic interventions in children's lives weakened the role of the family and encouraged passivity and dependence (1995: 6).

<sup>11</sup> According to De Vylder 'Not least in the former Soviet Union, and in Latin America, a ruthless policy of neglect of human and social development has often been pursued under the guise of the defence of family values' (2000: 6).

international child rights literature - should be balanced by similar consideration of the 'culture' of elites, especially those implicated in the development of policy.

The ultimate aim of this paper is to encourage further consideration of the poverty experienced by children as the product of the dialectical relationship between the construction of the institution of childhood, on one hand, and the impact of 'the combined and uneven development of capitalism across the world' upon processes of social reproduction, on the other (Saurin 1996: 675). It is intended to contribute to the research being undertaken through Young Lives by highlighting the broad historical and structural processes prevailing at the global, regional and national levels which have fundamental effects on the circumstances and experiences of the children and families involved in the study. As such, the paper provides an overview of the systemic macro-level forces that are causal in childhood poverty at the more localised level and a political economy lens through which Young Lives findings may be viewed.

In order to explore the relationship between childhood and the spread of global capitalism I shall take both elements in turn. Firstly, I shall consider the construction of childhood, suggesting the need to move beyond the hitherto primary focus within the sociology of childhood upon culture to the exclusion of political economy. This will be followed by discussion of the impact of macro-economic processes associated with global capitalism and neo-liberalism upon children/childhood.

## 2. 'Childhood' in Political Economy Perspective

In the development of a theoretically-informed approach to the political economy of childhood poverty it is first necessary to retrace our steps and ask how it is that this phenomenon has come to be considered in naturalistic - ahistorical and depoliticised - terms within academic thought. That is to say, how has it become widely acceptable to consider childhood poverty – as it is perpetuated amongst large swathes of the world's population – in a manner that divorces the economic conditions of the young from questions about the workings of power? The challenge is to consider independently the institution of childhood *and* the production of poverty respectively from an historical, political economy perspective. Only then can we consider effectively how the two interact dialectically over time.

The edited volume by Alison James and Alan Prout *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, first published in 1990, has proven foundational for the sociological debate on children and childhood that has unfolded in the intervening years. In particular, some of the key assertions made by the editors in the first chapter of the book have become central to the work of an emerging generation of scholars exploring childhood from a social science perspective, especially sociologists, anthropologists, and human geographers. The first and demonstrably the most influential assertion within the 'new paradigm' suggested by Prout and James was the following:

Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides the interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.

(1997: 8)

This assertion neatly captures the basis for argumentation against the tendency – notable in the work of Charles Darwin and numerous others since – to study children within a purely biological and thus universalistic framework (Prout 2005: 57). The social constructionist position articulated here has encouraged research that examines different childhoods and the experiences of children in innumerable locations around the world. A focus of much of this work has been upon the ways in which children, as a specific and often marginalised section of society, are addressed within the contexts of everyday life, particularly schools, neighbourhoods, and households. Of particular concern has been the consequence for children's lives of the failure or reluctance of adults and adult institutions to recognise and engage with them as social actors..

The non-recognition of children's agency and subjectivity is certainly an important manifestation of unequal power relations, as well as part of the dynamic that reproduces such inequality. However, a primary focus upon culture/discourse that leads to patterns of (non)recognition reveals only half the story. If our aim is to understand the structuring of childhood as an institution and its consequences for children then we must also consider power as manifest through political economic processes. Here a distinction between 'lifeworld' – the world as experienced and pursued within relatively informal aspects of life - and 'systems' – relatively formal processes that function beyond the specific subjectivities of individuals, shaping their lives and opportunities often in unseen ways – seems apposite (Sayer 2001: 689). An analogy with gender may be helpful to illustrate the point. It is clearly vital to explore the ways that patriarchy as a cultural artefact impacts upon the lives of women through non-recognition of their social, economic and political roles and capabilities. However, the power and privilege of males also shapes women's lives through political economic policies and practices: for example through the expansion of low-paid, 'female' labour – often in the service and light-industrial sectors (Standing 1989; Cagatay and Ozler 1995). Though values may be invoked to justify discriminatory policies and practices, such policies and practices are not reducible to culture since they take on a life of their own, 'independent of intentions and justifications', and commonly endure (Sayer 2001: 689). Similarly in the case of children, while the forces that directly shape their lives and opportunities inevitably reflect particular cultural/ideological perspectives, it is not sufficient to focus on such perspectives alone. If our aim is to understand how childhood is constructed and experienced we must also consider the impact of political economic forces (or 'systems') working over time, largely independent of purposive or reasoned action. Thus there is a vital need to integrate the well-established focus on the socio-cultural construction of childhood with a focus on political economic conditions if we are to understand how childhood poverty is perpetuated. So, for example, we should focus not simply on parents' decision to keep their children away from school as a cultural or attitudinal issue, but must look into such a decision within the context of the likely economic costs and benefits of sending a child to school versus sending him or her to work, or organising an early marriage. However, the tendency over recent years, as urged from within childhood studies and by child rights activists, has been to consider the cultural dimensions more than the economics surrounding this choice.

### **Beyond 'voice'**

The appeal made by Prout and James to study children's social relationships and cultures 'in their own right' and to allow children 'a more direct voice' has been responded to with alacrity by researchers working within both academic and practitioner settings. The result has been a helpful corrective to decades of research that failed 'to take children's own ideas and language into account' (Boyden and Ennew 1997: 9). Nevertheless, this valorisation of children's voices

has often led to research that pays little attention to the wider conditions that structure specific experiences. Moreover, reverence for 'children's voices' - as an undifferentiated mass - may lead to the essentialisation and decontextualisation of experiences that require understanding not only in terms of sectional factors such as gender, class and so on, but also with regards to the material conditions of a particular location and historical moment. Research that focuses solely or primarily on children's experience in relation to specific issues (i.e. 'lifeworlds'), such as exploitative labour, extreme poverty or child military recruitment, may be helpful for bringing to light systematised suffering. However, taken in isolation our understanding of the wider political economic factors ('systems') – operating over time - that perpetuate situations inimical to children's wellbeing remains limited. Such research lends itself to local-level advocacy efforts aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour rather than contributing to the development of a thoroughgoing challenge to the institutions and processes – local and global – that underwrite inequity and exploitation (Hart 2006, 2008).

With regards to methodology an illuminating parallel can be drawn between early feminism and the current calls for the greater engagement of researchers with children. Leena Alanen has drawn the parallel as follows:

An interesting point here is that [Childhood Studies] in many respects resembles the first stage of feminist research – then called Women's Studies – initiated in the 1970s by the academic section of the second wave of the movement and fuelled by recognition of a contradiction between women's active presence in society and their marginality in its analysis. The first task called for by this situation was to 'add' women to all areas and levels of scientific knowledge production...it seems that the recent upsurge of research focusing on conditions of children's life and childhood is following a logic akin to that of the first stage of academic feminism; as a result of numerous studies of childhood, children are being 'added' to accounts of social life, structures, and processes in which only adults were previously identified as actors...

(1994: 29-30)

The need to move more concertedly beyond an 'additive' approach to consideration of children's lives – as happened in much feminist scholarship with respect to women - is increasingly apparent. Consideration of the interplay between the ongoing structuring of childhood through culture/ideology, on the one hand, and material conditions, on the other, is surely the next step. The methodological challenge is not simply to facilitate better and more fully the voices of children in describing their lives and perspectives but also, as observed by Dorothy Smith, to 'focus on the processes and relations outside their immediate daily lives that help to create the conditions of those lives and the experiences of living in those places' (1988: 46).

## **Childhood and history**

In spite of the paradigmatic insistence on childhood as a social construction, key writers within the new social studies of childhood have generally offered little reflection on the emergence of this field of study within a specific tradition of thought. Thus, the basic ideas that inform enquiry about society and about children often remain naturalised by default. Such lack of attention to history has consequences for efforts to understand the institution of childhood and the lives of children beyond the European or North American setting. The conceptual shortcomings may be seen through the example of the notion that the lives of the young are separable from those of adults: an assumption underlying common invocations of children's 'worlds', 'cultures' and 'communities' (Prout and James, (1990) 1997; Hirschfeld

2002; Kehily and Swann 2003). The following statement by Lawrence Hirschfeld gives a sense of the underlying assumptions:

Children... constitute themselves into semi-autonomous subcultures and as such can be as usefully explored by anthropologists as Senegalese street merchants in Marseille, Vietnamese rice farmers in Louisiana, or high-energy physicists at Lawrence Livermore.

(2002: 613)

Such sentiments suggest a lack of attention to the historicity of ideas and practices regarding the separability of children from adults. The proposition that childhood should be conducted away from the contaminating effects of the 'adult world', emerged from within a tradition of European thought that finds its genesis in the Romanticism of Jean Jacques Rousseau (*Emile*, 1762). Such separability remains not only a basic assumption of the sociological writing on children and childhood but a positive value and the rationale for further empirical research, as the quote above from Hirschfeld illustrates.

While the separability of children/childhood from adults/adulthood emerged as a moral viewpoint in eighteenth century Europe, it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it started to become a social reality amongst the masses. As Viviana Zelizer notes, the rapid decline in the numbers of American child workers (aged 10-15 years) – and hence their removal from the public domain - during the early decades of the twentieth century was only partly attributable to moral concern that children should be kept apart from the 'adult world' of waged labour. It was also due to a host of material factors that included the growth of incomes enabling households to survive from the paid work of a single (adult male) breadwinner; union fears that the extensive employment of children would force down wages; technological advances that rendered many of the menial tasks hitherto undertaken by children obsolete; the needs of industrial capitalism for a skilled, educated workforce, and so on (Zelizer 1985: 62-63).

The example of childhood separability thus illustrates that, in its contours, the institution of childhood is inevitably the product of an interplay between factors that are both ideological/cultural *and* material. After all, while Rousseau may have captured and promoted a popular belief that children should enjoy 'childhood' away from the cares of the 'adult world', it was more than 150 years after the publication of his manifesto on the subject – *Emile*, in 1762 – that both ideological/cultural *and* material conditions in Western Europe and North America were such that children's removal from the 'adult world' of work became a reality for the vast majority.

Such historically specific processes of change and the range of factors that determine their nature and timing need to be placed centre-stage in any effort to understand childhood (and childhood poverty) in particular contexts. An enduring insistence on the separability of childhood with little consideration of historical (political economic and cultural/ideological) context suggests a reluctance to do so. And yet, such separability remains far from universal. In failing to recognise the specificity of historical experience in Europe or North America we remain closed off to difference. While the majority of children in certain parts of the world (notably the wealthier nations) may have become removed from key areas of 'adult life' – most obviously waged work – this is not a global reality (Pupavac 2001: 101). As a recent study asserted, in 2002 there were still an estimated 211 million 'economically active' children aged 5–14 around the world. However, only one percent was found in the world's richest countries (ILO/IPEC/SIMPOC 2002). By comparison an estimated 61% of the total number

was in the Asia-Pacific region and around 30% in Africa.<sup>12</sup> Yet, I would contend that the implications of this basic fact have been obscured by an insufficiency in attention to the inter-relationship between the historical diversity of ideas about childhood and the role of material conditions in shaping childhood and children's lives. This is a shortcoming noted recently by Alan Prout of earlier work in the sociology of childhood, including his own:

... [social constructionism] grants discourse (narrative, representation, symbolisation...) a monopoly as the medium through which social life, and therefore childhood is constructed. Accounts of the socially constructed child always privilege discourse. Some versions are distinctly idealist about childhood while others are simply silent or vague about the material components of social life. At best there is an equivocal and uneasy evasiveness about materiality...

(2005: 63)

### **Childhood poverty as constructed through culture and political economy**

The interplay between the cultural and the material, and the resulting consequences for children's lives, can be witnessed in the realm of work. Whether through laws or customary practice, those not yet considered fully adult are commonly treated less favourably than others even for the same work. Association with 'childhood' or 'youth' is used in many parts of the world as a rationale for paying lower wages to members of the population below an arbitrarily-determined age.<sup>13</sup> As Deborah Levison has observed, children are also often relegated to particular and undesirable jobs by virtue of hegemonic assumptions about their best interests:

It is no coincidence that under the great majority of nations' domestic laws and international conventions, the types of work that children most want to do are forbidden them, while the types of work that they least want to do are allowed and often expected of them. Researchers who systematically listen to and observe them find that children in diverse countries and situations prefer paid work over unpaid work, work outside the home over work inside the home, and work for non family employers over work for family employers. Like adults, children value work that results in status (including respect and appreciation), skills, responsibility and money. Most countries, however, follow the recommendations of the International Labour Organization in allowing children to participate in unpaid work in household chores, child care, or a family business, while banning or severely limiting child work in the paid labour force.

(2000: 125)

Culturally-specific assumptions about children's (lesser) financial needs or their comparative lack of 'adult' competency may account for the prejudicial treatment of some individual child workers. However, this is an insufficient explanation for the likely majority. A major issue at

<sup>12</sup> Data emerging from Young Lives - especially Ethiopia - suggests a further complication to the picture by revealing high levels of workplace participation amongst children from age twelve who are also attending school. Normative assumptions by the international community and by many government agencies that school and work are intrinsically incompatible in children's lives creates great personal struggle.

<sup>13</sup> For example, as of July 2008 the rates of minimum pay in the UK were as follows: £5.52 per hour for workers aged 22 years and older; a so-called 'development rate' of £4.60 per hour for workers aged 18-21 inclusive; and £3.40 per hour for all workers under the age of 18, who are no longer of compulsory school age (i.e. 16).

Source: HM Revenue and Customs <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/nmw/#comp>

stake here is one of power: firstly, the power of children in relation to adults as manifest in terms of defining 'appropriate' work and in negotiating pay and conditions,<sup>14</sup> and, secondly, the power of the poor (children and adults) to obtain fair pay and conditions from employers. Writing of child workers in Mexican supermarkets, Stuart Aitken and colleagues offer an example of how power (rather than cultural understandings of childhood) determines the employment patterns of children:

... supermarkets took care to not allow children older than 14 to participate as packers, because to do so requires recognition of their labour rights; including a regular salary, benefits and the right to join a union.

(2006: 371)

The call of the International Movement of Working Children for dignity, respect, security and an end to exploitation in the workplace demonstrates the challenges faced by those who engage in the labour market from the disadvantageous cultural and political economic status of 'child'.<sup>15</sup> To complicate the picture, this Movement's key statement of demands suggests that young workers also have particular protection, health, educational, and recreational needs in relation to their physical and social development. In seeking to understand the particular childhoods of young workers such as these we have to move beyond consideration of cultural construction alone and embrace the complex interplay of biology, socio-economic role and the political economic environment.

For children involved in domestic work, the challenges in terms of exploitation and lost opportunities may be just as great and yet the visibility may be even less. Due to the gendered division of labour in many parts of the world, girls often bear particularly heavy responsibility for the care and nurturance of others. Again, it is misleading to construe the imposition of such a workload purely in terms of the cultural construction of childhood. This ignores the pressures arising from neo-liberal reform and market integration that commonly lead to increased workload within the household for girls, as discussed in the following section. In other words, our understanding of girls' domestic work should embrace the interplay between gendered constructions of childhood and changing material conditions resulting from broader political economic processes.

### 3. Child-focussed Political Economy

In his 2004 book *The Future of Childhood* Alan Prout goes further than in many previous sociological writings (including his own) in considering the effects of capitalist expansion upon the lives of children. He notes, for example, that '... there are vast disparities in the social and economic conditions of children's (and adults') lives around the globe and these are a consequence of the workings of the global economy' (2005: 17-18). Nevertheless, acknowledgement of such disparities is insufficient. We also need to situate childhood and

<sup>14</sup> In the words of Helmut Wintersberger '... the precarious role of children as economic actors is not so much an economic phenomenon as it is the consequence of their weak position in society at large' (1994: 215).

<sup>15</sup> The Kandapur Declaration, articulating the Movement's core concerns was formulated in 1996. See <http://www.workingchild.org/prota2.htm>

children's lives in relation to the histories of incorporation of their societies into the global economy. This is a point overlooked by Prout, as demonstrated in the following quote wherein he reverts to a singular vision of childhood as the product of experience in Euro-America:

... it is necessary to examine contemporary childhood (sic) in its historical context. This context is rooted in the political, economic, technological, social and cultural changes that took place in Europe from about the eighteenth century onwards, which gave rise to the belief that history was entering a distinctive 'modern' era.

(2004: 8)

It is not simply that the global economy has deleterious effects upon some children in some locations at this point in time. Rather, whole societies are impacted by the global economy in ways that have profound consequences for the institution of childhood (and for children's lives) rendering it very different in scale and nature from childhood as imagined from the vantage point of twenty-first century Western Europe ('contemporary childhood' in Prout's terminology). The nature and extent of these consequences will inevitably relate to the manner and timing of penetration by neo-liberalism and incorporation into the global market. While individual societies obviously differ in this respect, broadly-speaking we can discern certain trends amongst countries in the global South, as exemplified by the impact upon women noted extensively by feminist economists.

In accounts of the impact of structural adjustment policies it has emerged that in many places the workload of women is liable to increase exponentially (e.g. Robertson and Berger 1986, Moser 1989; Deere et. al. 1990; Elson 1995). For example, the consequences for Mexican women are described by Alarcon and McKinley as follows:

Women are called on to spend more time caring for the sick or the elderly, hunting for bargains, producing more food, or purchasing cheaper food items that require more preparation. Layoffs and cuts in real wages often translate into longer hours for women in household activities or informal activities to compensate for the loss of family income. In effect, women acts as 'shock absorbers', putting in more hours in unpaid or low-paid activities that are in large part unrecognised by standard economic accounting.

(1999: 109)

It has been argued that capitalist expansion has often led to an increase in children's paid and unpaid work as well.<sup>16</sup> Jean and John Comaroff have drawn our attention to the observation of Karl Marx that capital accumulation in its early stages commonly makes particular use of child labour, replacing 'skilled labourers by less skilled, mature labourers by immature, male by female' (Marx 1967: 635; cited in Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 300; see also Katz 2004: 143). Whether or not Marx's observation has universal and transhistorical validity is a question for empirical enquiry. Certainly, the well-known instances of children in urban centres of the global South labouring for minimal pay in the production of goods for Western companies would seem to accord with his thesis.

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<sup>16</sup> To be clear, I am not assuming that child work is inherently problematic, nor that it can automatically be related to childhood poverty as either a cause or effect (White 1999: 133-4; Levison and Boyden 2000: 17-19). Rather, as Katz notes, the important issues are how and when children work and the relationship of their labouring activities to opportunities for social interaction, leisure and education (however defined) (2004). Our concern should be directed at work that undermines children's development in social, physical, psychological and intellectual terms, and that, thereby, impedes their life chances and stymies processes of social reproduction.

Nevertheless, we should look beyond the involvement of children in manufacturing.

Advocacy efforts mounted since the early 90s aimed at the eradication of child labour have often forced children out of relatively well-paid, comparatively safe work in manufacturing<sup>17</sup>, a trend compounded in some cases by technological advancement. Instead, their engagement in domestic (unpaid) labour, and in economic pursuits in rural areas and on the margins of urban society appears to have increased. For example, Katz notes the following in respect of the children in Howa village in Sudan:

While the continued importance of child labour in urban and industrial areas of the 'third world' is well recognised, my research indicated that capitalist 'development' brought about an intensification and expansion of children's work in the countryside as well.

(2004: 143)

This point has been overlooked by feminist economists who have tended to focus only on the impact of neo-liberalism on women. In locations where the shift to a market economy and the privatisation of services has led to a greatly increased workload for women, the young have found themselves with additional responsibilities in a range of areas that include care for younger siblings, housework, cooking, tending to crops and to animals intended for domestic consumption (De Tray 1973; Cain 1977; Katz 2004). This additional burden borne by children – especially girls – is also ignored by conventional macro-economic models that 'rarely consider children to be productive members of a family' (Boyden and Levison 2000: 17).

While Marx's observation about the link between 'the early stages of capital accumulation' and 'the conscription of child labour' may hold in certain contexts, we need to exercise caution in assuming that the historical experience of the industrialised world – in terms of the ultimate removal of most children from the workplace – will necessarily be repeated everywhere given time. As noted earlier, in Europe and North America, economic, socio-political and technical developments led to the end of employment for the majority of children. Such developments occurred at a time when industrial ownership was in the hands of fellow nationals and capital accumulation remained largely within the state.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, industrialisation in Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally took place in a context of unionised labour and the development of state welfare enabled by a properly functioning taxation system.

In contrast, industrial development as it is currently pursued in many poorer nations beyond Europe and North America often occurs with none of the same protection, regulation or state support. Instead, countries currently experiencing a measure of industrial development are compelled to pursue integration into the global economy on terms that offer little prospect for the betterment of all but a small minority of ordinary citizens, including children. In spite of the assumptions of some free market ideologues, the global market clearly does not operate as an impartial and impersonal mechanism. Those who enter it later in its trajectory - often with some measure of compulsion - are obliged to negotiate well-established dynamics, both formalised (for example, through rules and tariffs) and informal (for example, networks and alliances) that have been shaped by the power of dominant capital often operating in collaboration with or directly through governmental institutions, international trade bodies and

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<sup>17</sup> See Alam 1997; Yanz and Jeffcott 1998

<sup>18</sup> Ha-Joon Chang (2007) draws our attention to the protectionism practiced by countries such as the US and UK during their own industrialisation and now denied by the governments of such countries to others currently pursuing their own industrial development.

UN agencies (cf. Stiglitz 2002: 61). Thus, they compete at enormous disadvantage in a game the rules and nature of which they have had little or no say in formulating (Payne 2005).

Western corporate interests and the ideology of influential economists working with the IMF and World Bank in particular have obliged indebted governments since the 1980s to open up their economies to those who seek to purchase state-owned businesses and run them for the benefit of a political economic elite rather than for the good of the citizenry. This has been clearly witnessed in Russia, for example, where the efforts of Mikhail Gorbachev to achieve a gradual shift from communism to a managed economy in which basic services and employment were protected were effectively trounced by the free market radicalism of Yeltsin supported by the US government, the IMF, and American economists (Klein 2007: Chapter 11; Sachs 2005: Chapter 7).

Yeltsin's 'reforms' – like those of Pinochet in Chile, the generals in Argentina, Suharto in Indonesia and Deng Xiaoping in China – were backed up the use of brutal force against opponents and the overturning of democratic processes and institutions. The terror tactics and destruction required to enable such reform in these countries are the most obvious outward signs of the asymmetrical power relations that underpin and are reproduced by neo-liberalism: a point systematically sidestepped by Milton Friedman and those following in his path who have commonly presented themselves merely as technicians, and their efforts as being a technical fix.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, policies at the heart of the 'Washington Consensus'<sup>20</sup> and urged upon liberalising economies have targeted issues that are arguably of more concern for the wealthy than for the poor, including children. For example, dealing with inflation has commonly been prioritised over employment. This may look like an arbitrary technical matter. However, as Stefan De Vylder points out, 'moderately inflationary policies tend to have a less negative impact on young families with children, who are often indebted. An erosion of their debts through inflation may even be in their interest' (2000: 38). Inflation, on the other hand, particularly damages corporate interests. Conversely, neglecting employment or even allowing jobs to be lost rapidly and in massive numbers - as happened in many countries with privatisation and the removal of all trade barriers – contributes to lower labour costs for business while having a direct and devastating impact upon poor families, particularly when coupled with the erosion of state welfare and the imposition of user fees for health and education.

Such consequences of 'shock therapy' receive little attention from its champions amongst the policy-making elites. For example, Jeffrey Sachs, in his account of 'the victory over hyperinflation' in Bolivia (2005: 99) fails to make mention of the fact that this 'economic miracle' was achieved through a sustained attack on the employment conditions and salaries of the poor that resulted in large numbers being 'discarded from the economy altogether and turned into surplus people' (Klein 2007: 149). Engagement in coca farming grew rapidly as a response to under- and un-employment, reduced salaries and bad working conditions, to the extent that within two years of the introduction of 'shock therapy' roughly 350,000 people were earning a living from the drug trade. Furthermore, according to Naomi Klein, 'the coca industry played a significant role in resuscitating Bolivia's economy and beating inflation (a

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<sup>19</sup> Naomi Klein quotes Milton Friedman in his autobiography – *Two Lucky People: Memoirs* – where he described his role in assisting Pinochet as offering 'technical medical advice to the Chilean Government to help end a medical plague – the plague of inflation' (2007: 113).

<sup>20</sup> This refers to the list of economic policies compiled by John Williamson – a key adviser to the IMF and World Bank - in 1989. Privatisation, deregulation / free trade, and cuts in public spending form the core of this articulation of neo-liberal ideology.

fact now recognised by historians but never mentioned by Sachs in explanations of how his reforms triumphed over inflation)' (2007: 150).<sup>21</sup>

As noted above, given the enormous disadvantage of governments in the global South in their efforts to develop national economies for the benefit of the citizenry, we cannot assume that future growth will occur to an extent and in a manner sufficient to ensure the termination of children's employment under conditions that constrain their development. Moreover, to the extent that capitalist penetration into many parts of the global South is motivated by the quest to reduce labour and other production costs, there is an economic incentive to maintain large numbers of people at survival level as a cheap and expendable resource. According to Mark Duffield, from the perspective of (neo)liberal development, this globally 'surplus' population is to exist merely at the level of self-reliance rather than progress to the material condition of 'developed' nations (2007).<sup>22</sup> Barbara Harriss-White echoes this point in the following terms:

Calls for poor people to empower themselves and support for some of them to organise, while necessary, are not sufficient. Such practices are not equal to the ways in which poverty is embedded in the institutions and processes of the capitalist mode of production.

(2006: 1245)

Children may be removed from high profile forms of employment – such as in sweatshops – that make Western consumers uneasy. However, their engagement in innumerable forms of paid and unpaid work, often under conditions even worse than those in sweatshops, seems unlikely to cease without significant modifications to neo-liberal reform and the imposition of constraints upon corporate power. The following quote highlights the plight of children in Thailand in light of such reform following the Asian crisis in the late 1990s:

'It was the rich who benefited from the boom ... but we, the poor, pay the price of the crisis. Even our limited access to schools and health is now beginning to disappear. We fear for our children's future' said Khun Bunjan, a community leader from the slums of Khun Kaen in north-east Thailand, and her husband, Khun Wichai.

Khun Wichai lost his job in the local factory and his wife is selling less at the local market. As a result, they took both their son and daughter out of school and put them to work. 'What is the justice in having to send our children to the garbage site every day to support the family?' questions Khun Bunjan. But Khun Wichai thinks he is lucky. His neighbours are sending their children to beg, and some girls became prostitutes.

(United Nations 1999: 10)

## Cuts in social spending

As noted earlier a common element of neo-liberal reform imposed upon indebted governments by the IMF has been significant curtailment of spending in areas that directly affect children (De Vylder 2000: 51). Thus, for example, in his study of the national economies of the former Soviet Union in the years 1989 to 1994, Andrea Cornia observed a sharp decline in the real value of public expenditure in several states, along with the elimination of consumer subsidies on goods such as clothing, toys and books of particular

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<sup>21</sup> See also Conaghan and Malloy 1994; Leons and Sanabria 1997.

<sup>22</sup> 'The view adopted here...is that development is a regime of biopolitics that generically divides humankind into developed and underdeveloped species-life' (Duffield 2007: 16).

importance to the young, and the introduction of user fees for services such as kindergartens, school meals and some health services that had previously been provided free of charge (1994: 10-13). Such changes took place in the context of rapid increases in economic inequality, particularly in Eastern and South Eastern European states such as Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Uzbekistan where the scale of inequality – measured in terms of the Gini coefficient – rose 10 to 15% over pre-1989 levels (Cornia 2004: 4; UNDP 2006). A growing number of poor people in these countries – as in many others – have been obliged to pay for goods and services to an unprecedented extent while, at the same time, their own employment has often become less secure and their income reduced in real terms.

According to a recent study conducted for the World Bank, in 97% of the 79 countries surveyed families were obliged to pay some form of fees in order for children to have access to primary education. As the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, the late Katerina Tomasevski, pointed out, poor countries are often compelled to pass on the costs of education in order to free up their limited resources for the servicing of debt. She cites the example of the Phillipines during the 1990s when the government was struggling to repay the massive debts incurred during the US-supported dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In 1991 the budgetary allocation for debt servicing was Peso 86 billion compared to Peso 27 billion for education (2005: 11-12). For its part, the World Bank appears caught between its commitment to ensuring free primary education, on one hand, and its role as a creditor seeking to recover its debts, on the other. In Tomasevski's view, this dilemma was resolved as follows:

The human rights approach would have safeguarded budgetary allocations necessary to ensure free education for all school-age children, but the World Bank's approach went in the opposite direction. The cost of primary schooling was removed from the public to the private budget, from the government to the family.

(2005: 4)

The consequences for children of imposing fees have yet to be comprehensively researched across the diverse locations where this has taken place. Some have argued that the introduction of user fees leads to improved services and also encourages parents to take their children's education more seriously by, for example, getting involved in parent-teacher associations (see Tilak 1997: 64). Nevertheless, the limited evidence also seems to suggest, as one might predict, that the imposition of user fees discourages enrolment of children from the poorest families. For example, writing of the 'transition' economies of the former Soviet Union, Andrea Cornia notes a widespread decline in school enrolments at all levels – kindergarten, primary and secondary - as a direct consequence of the introduction of fees in a setting where education had formerly been provided free of charge and to a high standard (Cornia 2005: 35; also Stiglitz 2002: 20; Young Lives 2006, 2007).

## **Privatisation**

The impact of privatisation of basic utilities on childhood poverty is also yet to be widely studied. Although, here again, the existing evidence gives cause for concern. In many parts of the world governments have been obliged to sell off state-run companies for water, electricity, transportation and telecommunications as a condition for IMF and World Bank loans or with the encouragement of the US and other donor governments. Some researchers report improvements in services – such as a reduction in child mortality in areas of Argentina where water was privatised in the 1990s (Galiani et. al. 2005). However, such accounts should not dim concern over the effects of privatisation, given that this has generally occurred in tandem with deregulation and the curtailment of union and other popular representation.

Reports of vast increases in prices that have put basic services beyond the reach of many poor people are surfacing in various parts of the world. For example, in a well-known case, the sale of the state-run water company in Bolivia's third largest city Cochabamba to the Bechtel Group Inc. led to an immediate increase in water bills of 50%. Ultimately, the demonstrations this generated – in which, according to one report, adolescent children living on the streets played the biggest role - resulted in Bechtel leaving the country (Finnegan 2002). In other countries, such privatisation has not been reversed and ordinary citizens are obliged to live with the consequences. For example, IMF and Inter-American Development Bank policies led to privatisation in Nicaragua and with that a 30% increase in water prices (Grusky 2001), while privatisation in the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, has meant that low-income families have to spend up to a fifth of household budgets on water alone (World Bank 2000). As one commentator notes, 'when water become more expensive and less accessible, women and children, who bear most of the burden of daily household chores, must travel farther and work harder to collect water - often resorting to water from polluted streams and rivers' (Grusky 2001; see also Gordon et. al. 2003). Ultimately, however, the issue is not simply about privatisation *per se* but the accompanying lack of regulation, monitoring and accountability, as well as the use of state and corporate power to prevent mobilisation by the poor in opposition.<sup>23</sup>

While capitalist expansion and neo-liberal reform seems to impact negatively upon the lives of many of the world's poor children, we should not assume a uniformity of experience. Even amongst the impoverished young population of a particular country, the specific effects of capitalism will manifest in very different ways, mediated and moderated by various factors including gender, birth order, household composition, ethnicity, class/caste and so on. As a recent report on the impact of trade liberalisation in Vietnam observed:

Overall our analysis suggests that children from ethnic minority group households, female-headed households, households with low levels of maternal education, impoverished households that are susceptible to economic shocks, as well as communes with a high concentration of poverty are likely to be the most vulnerable to future economic reforms and will be most in need of social protection measures.

(Nguyen and Jones 2006: 33)

## The subjective dimension of childhood poverty

Inequality is not only linked in many cases to increased levels of poverty in an objective sense, there is also an important subjective dimension, commonly linked to relative poverty. Rapid increases in inequality linked to displays of conspicuous wealth amongst newly-rich elites are liable to contribute to a heightened *sense* of being poor – an issue that came out forcefully in a recent World Bank study into the experience of poverty (Narayan et. al. 2000). To quote Barbara Harriss-White:

As commodification intensifies its grip, public expectations based on a culturally defined standard of private consumption become generalised. Wages are the compulsory precondition of these naturalised – but ever growing – levels of consumption. An inability to achieve the required consumption level means relative poverty. (ibid)

<sup>23</sup> The collusion of big business and government was witnessed in a particularly explicit form in the efforts by the Enron Corporation and the Indian state of Maharashtra to privatise the electricity supply during the 1990s. Non-violent protests against the massive price hikes and environmental degradation were met with brutal repression (Human Rights Watch 1999).

The penetration of dominant capital beyond the world's fully capitalist economies has not only been for the purposes of reducing production costs but also in search of new markets. Marketing efforts are playing a vital role in raising expectations, creating among children and youth the desire for particular goods that are beyond their economic reach. Schooling is also playing a critical role in promoting these kinds of expectations. This has been noted, for example, in recent research conducted in North India:

The global spread of images based on prolonged participation in schooling and subsequent entry into professional or white-collar work had encouraged parents and young men to invest time, money and effort in extended formal schooling. In the global South especially, but also in many 'Northern' contexts, widely different forms of neo-liberal economic change have simultaneously undermined the opportunities for educated young men to obtain stable and well-paid work.

(Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffrey 2008: 9)

The consequences in terms of heightened frustration and societal disharmony can, for the most part, only be guessed at given the lack of research on such matters beyond Europe and North America. Nevertheless, the evidence from wealthy nations is salutary. For example, Juliet Schor, writing of the US, asserts the link between the contemporary 'marketing culture' and the worsening physical and mental health of the current generation of children:

Sometimes kids desperately want a product because they're convinced it's essential to their happiness but there's no money to pay for it. As the nation's children are increasingly likely to live in poor and low-income households, this gap between desire and means is likely to grow... many young people are suffering from feelings of deep inadequacy brought on by an inability to keep up with consumer culture.

(2004: 179)

It seems inevitable that the psychological effects of inequality and frustrated aspiration will impact negatively upon social cohesion. Cindi Katz makes the following observation in this regard:

As capital reneges on its Fordist promises in the global North, and the promissory note of 'development' is recognised as bankrupt in the South, children in both places have nevertheless been drawn into the swirl of increased consumption that makes poor children's lack of money and the limited prospects for its acquisition even more acute. The alienation, anger, and despair that ensue pock the face of social life transnationally. The disfigurement is often blamed on young people rather than on the global (and local) marketeering strategies that engender it, despite the obvious and growing vigour of those strategies.

(2004: 182)

The blame that Katz writes about is evidenced in the discourse surrounding the so-called 'youth bulge hypothesis'. Proponents of this hypothesis see the unrest of young people in impoverished regions of the world as purely the function of demographics: suggesting that a high proportion of youth in a population leads, in itself, to an increased likelihood of instability and violence (Kaplan 1994; Huntington 1996; Cordesman 2002). The research record, such as it is, suggests a more complex interplay between demographics, employment opportunities and the commodification of social life resulting from capitalist expansion. For example, writing of young combatants in Liberia's brutal internal wars, Mats Utas has observed the following:

For many, the situation was so hopeless that when the civil war intensified in 1989 the war became an opportunity to obtain what many youth had failed to access through their initial migration from countryside to city or plantation. Economic prosperity and the sensation of power and respect were immediate and most welcome for a newly initiated member of a rebel army, with the AK 47 becoming the equivalent of a credit card – as it once again connected young men to the dreams of the modern world of goods and money.

(2008: 117)

Further study is urgently needed to explore the impact of corporate marketing in the context of extreme economic inequality if the assumptions inherent to the 'youth bulge hypothesis' are to be challenged comprehensively.

### **What of global efforts to address childhood poverty?**

In 1999, the IMF and the World Bank introduced a new approach to tackle poverty – the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). This effectively replaced Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) for the poorest countries that were thereby required to develop a PRSP in order to access debt relief under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC2) facility. In principle they would be entitled to debt relief once they had a full PRSP in place and had implemented agreed actions to reduce poverty.

According to the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre at the University of Birmingham the PRSP constitutes 'a new approach to poverty reduction, and to partnership between governments and donors, which, it is hoped, will lead to more effective policies for attacking poverty, and hence more effective aid' (n.d.). The evidence to date, however, offers a less hopeful picture. At a general level it has been observed that, for all the rhetoric, PRSPs are predicated upon the same conditionalities (such as privatisation, free trade, deregulation, etc) as SAPs, with potentially the same consequences (Marcus et. al. 2002; Porter and Craig 2004). This view has been borne out in analysis of implementation. A 2005 study of the impact of PRSPs on childhood poverty in Southern Africa (Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana) noted that 'even a cursory read leaves no doubt that the Southern African PRSPs give the highest priority to economic growth as a means to reduce poverty' (Robinson 2003). Thus we can see a continuation of the neo-liberal article of faith that growth – through a process of trickle-down – will serve to alleviate poverty. This is in spite of abundant evidence from newly liberalised economies that the benefits of growth have been distributed in a manner that has served to exacerbate inequalities, often increasing the scale and depth of childhood poverty.<sup>24</sup> The author of this report also notes the continuation of tight fiscal policy preventing adequate spending on basic services. Consequently, user fees are maintained which in themselves tend 'to restrict access to services by the poor and to exacerbate poverty itself' (Robinson 2003: 7). Such findings lend weight to the observation of Rachel Marcus and colleagues that PRSPs represent 'business as usual' (2002: 1118). As these authors point out, the measures required to tackle childhood poverty go far beyond the scope of the PRSPs:

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<sup>24</sup> That this is the case is being demonstrated in each of Young Lives' four research countries (<http://www.younglives.org.uk/publications/country-reports>).

... eradicating childhood poverty requires substantial changes in the power relations of international development — with greater national control, greater inputs from disadvantaged people themselves, and an end to global economic policies and structures which systematically advantage rich countries and people. The latter is clearly beyond the scope of national poverty strategies. Indeed, PRSPs operate within the context of, and reflect IFI conditionalities, which overall may serve to increase inequalities within countries and between countries, even if the relative positions of some countries or groups improve.

(2002: 1118)

## 4. New Perspectives on Research on Childhood Poverty

Remember Friday 14 March 2008: it was the day the dream of global free-market capitalism died.

Martin Wolf, *Financial Times* 26 March 2008

Writing this concluding section in October 2008, amidst financial crisis and talk of an impending global recession, neo-liberalism seems set to be questioned to its core. Advocates of the free market within the US and elsewhere have witnessed the overturn of their efforts as governments step in to rescue floundering financial institutions and nationalise private enterprises, while calls grow for the reintroduction of regulatory measures steadily removed since the late 1970s. Where this will lead no one appears willing to predict. However, it is clear that fundamental change in the workings of the global economy is inevitable. Whether this change will impact positively on childhood poverty depends in some measure on our ability to enhance and promote understanding of the relationship between macro processes of political economy and the everyday reality for children living on the margins of the world's wealthy and powerful nations. In short, we need the ability to identify and advocate for the requisite break with 'business as usual'.

So far this paper has sought to offer an account of how childhood should be relocated within material (and thus political economic) context, complementing the theorisation of childhood as a socio-cultural construct. I have also sought to consider the ways in which the current workings of the global political economy are implicated in the creation or perpetuation of poverty as it particularly affects the lives of children. In this final section, I intend to bring these two themes together in a discussion of the ways that childhood poverty might be investigated at this critical historical juncture within a given local context. My aim is neither to suggest specific methods nor even to propose a meta-theoretical approach. Rather I hope to encourage thought about how we might examine childhood poverty in a manner that takes proper account of political economic processes intertwined with culture/ideology which, while possibly distant in geographic terms, are very much present and implicated in the economic challenges that children and their families face within daily life. The aim of such study is to identify the measures necessary to tackle childhood poverty in a significant manner: measures that may have become more possible due to the current crisis of global capitalism. In focussing on the impact of the global within the local arena, I am not seeking to absolve

intermediaries – particularly local and national governments, as well as the poor themselves – of their responsibilities. However, I am concerned that we situate the exercise of such responsibility with reference to power relations operating from the global to local levels.

I shall organise my discussion in this final section around the topic of social reproduction. This is more than an arbitrary hook on which to hang my argument. Consideration of social reproduction – as an historically specific set of practices – opens to examination the ways in which childhood poverty is currently created, sustained or ameliorated by the neo-liberal regime and the workings of global capitalism. A key function of the practices of social reproduction is to prepare emerging generations for their role as socio-economic actors. Little attention has generally been paid by the architects of neo-liberal economic policy to the challenges of such a task due to the assumption that ‘the production and maintenance of ‘human resources’ is undertaken for love and are unaffected by money, and therefore they are not affected by economy-wide changes’ (Levison and Boyden 2000: 21). According to Cindi Katz, however, ‘globalised capitalism has changed the face of social reproduction worldwide over the past three decades.’ The withdrawal from commitment to place has been accompanied by the increasing mobility of capitalist production and a consequent withdrawal from investment in publicly-funded services and a ‘reliance on private means of securing and sustaining social reproduction...’ (2001: 710). In the remainder of this paper I shall highlight various aspects of social reproduction, the investigation of which may serve to reveal the linkages between global political economy and childhood poverty in particular locales.

It would be misleading to suggest that poverty experienced during the early years of life necessarily determines outcomes in adulthood. As Shahin Yaqub observes ‘socio-economic attainments require a sound basis *at each life stage*” (2002: 1082, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, when considering the perpetuation of childhood poverty it is vital to examine children’s experience from the perspective of their potential life trajectories into social adulthood. In particular, rather than assuming that a specific form of education or training will lead to a brighter economic future, we need to consider the fit between what children are encouraged to learn and the likely opportunities to employ that knowledge for the purposes of economic advancement. This takes a rather dismal view of education as purely utilitarian, a point rigorously countered by Drèze and Sen, who have argued for the intrinsic value of being educated, amongst various important benefits (1995). Yet, at this stage of debate, it is necessary to focus especially on the proposition that schooling can lead to economic advancement, engaging critically with assumptions that the spread of Western-style schooling constitutes a universal panacea to poverty. Instead, we should be attentive to the relationship between the education and training that children experience and the economic possibilities that this opens up (or forecloses) within an economic landscape shaped in diverse ways by the workings of global capitalism. The following broad themes are intended to indicate possible avenues for exploring this relationship with due regard for the influence of economic globalisation, mediated by national and local institutions.

## **Employment prospects**

Firstly, we need to understand the emerging trends in employment in a given location. This entails consideration of various potentially influential factors. For example, we need to examine the level of mechanisation and technological sophistication within agricultural and industrial production; the likely durability of corporate investment; the state and direction of public sector employment; governmental support for private enterprise, including measures to protect local and national initiatives from foreign competition. In addition, it is important to consider the possibilities and trends of employment-related migration within and across national borders, particularly for relatively low-skilled workers. In light of experience in

countries where counter-inflationary measures have led to massive unemployment, we need also to attend to government trends in economic policy (and the pressures exerted at the international level upon governments). Furthermore, our analysis of future employment opportunity must take account of the nature, durability and accessibility of natural resources with due attention given to climate change, environmental degradation, legislation and demographic pressures. Finally, there is need to consider employment patterns in order to understand the possible employment trajectories of children differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, residential location, (dis)ability and other sectional factors. Here our investigation necessarily embraces patterns of discrimination, legislative measures, and the role of labour unions, as well as local values that may determine, for example, the types of jobs considered 'male' or 'female'.

The complicated relationship between education and employment within the context of economic restructuring is demonstrated by a recent study in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP), North India, where outcomes are demonstrably related to caste (high caste 'Jats' vs low caste 'Chamars'), as well as to religion (Hindu vs Muslim):

"But the ability of young men to benefit from education depended crucially on money, social resources and cultural capital. This was especially true in the early 2000s, when the liberalisation of the UP economy had created a highly segmented school system. The Jats were able to use their accumulated resources to monopolise access to non-state educational opportunities and privatised markets for jobs. They could 'up the ante' so that those following behind them in the educational contest acquired devalued credentials. In the context, educated Chamars and Muslims were enduringly excluded from the most prestigious qualifications and lucrative work."

Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffrey, 2008: 208

## The role of education

Rather than assuming education and training to be a necessary good in economic terms, the research lens should be focussed on the relationship of these initiatives to actual or potential employment markets. Turning to the content of schooling, we should explore the relevance of curricula to employment opportunities. This entails consideration of the skills, languages, social networks acquired, and their connection (or lack thereof) to the employment prospects of different children.

There is also an issue of quality. Are standards of schooling and training initiatives sufficient to impart the requisite skills and knowledge effectively? Reports have emerged from many locations of overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching materials and poorly-trained teachers all contributing to low educational attainment. In addition, innumerable authors, including Willis (1977), Spender and Sarah (1980), have alerted us to questions about the function of school in reinforcing patterns of exclusion by encouraging children to shape their aspirations according to existing class and gender-based hierarchies. Thus there may be a contradiction between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of education as an avenue to socio-economic advancement and, on the other, the actuality of classroom practice, which is inadequate and/or blunts aspiration, thereby reinforcing the status quo.

## Children's economic lives

For various reasons, some of which have been explored in this paper, both paid and unpaid work will continue to be a common feature of children's lives throughout much of the world for the foreseeable future. To the extent that it may serve to overcome poverty through, for example, the acquisition of useful skills and knowledge, or through the improvement of the

socio-economic conditions of the child worker and his or her household, it could be said that productive work plays a positive role in social reproduction and in the alleviation of poverty. Of course, this cannot be assumed. We need to consider in respect of each location and even each child whether and how the work that she or he undertakes may serve to ameliorate rather than perpetuate poverty. Close scrutiny of employment practices and patterns is thus needed to assess whether children's work makes a positive contribution to their circumstances – in the immediate and longer-term – or traps them in exploitative conditions that constrain the possibilities of economic advancement.

Governments have a role to play in regulating children's employment. The monitoring of employers and conditions of work; the enactment and enforcement of legislation; the space allowed for unionisation; flexibility in the provision of educational and health services (in order to accommodate working children) are some of the measures governmental institutions can implement that will determine whether employment serves to enhance or undermine children's long-term economic situation.

In addition to examining the role of governmental institutions, we should also consider the contribution made by local civil society organisations and international NGOs. Whether through advocacy activities or in the implementation of projects, such as out-of-hours schooling initiatives, such organisations may serve to enhance the conditions and consequences of children's work to a greater or lesser degree. The quality and extent of this activity, as well as the relationship of civil society and international organisations to each other, to governmental authorities and to institutions of global governance should all be explored.

## Households

Interpreting 'household' flexibly, it is critical to consider the nurturance of children, their opportunities for play and social interaction, the nutrition, health care and informal education they receive. All of these are basic elements of social reproduction, affecting the life trajectories of young people as socio-economic actors. How households are composed and significant changes in such composition – for example, trends towards nucleation – may have important consequences for individual children, affecting their roles and the support that they receive. Moreover, it is important to discern variation in household composition across a society or nation. Households with larger numbers of children are more likely to experience poverty. If researchers employ average household size to determine the total number of children living in poverty they will likely obscure the positive relationship between household size and poverty.

As I have suggested in an earlier section, support for children from within and beyond the household is an issue that should be seen in terms of culture/ideology and political economy functioning at different levels. In the immediate context, we need to understand patterns of intra-household functioning, discerning trends beyond the specificities of individual households. In some locations households may tend more to function as dynamic units in which each member serves a complementary role that enables the advancement of all. In others, relationships of neglect, competition or even exploitation may enable individual members to advance at the expense of others (Hartmann 1981; Bruce and Dwyer 1988; Elson 1992 1995). Here relations of power along lines of age, birth order and gender are liable to play a significant role.

In respect of education, we need to consider the decision-making processes within households about sending children to school. Such decisions will likely embrace the costs – both immediate and in terms of opportunities lost – as well as benefits of schooling.

Moreover, such decisions should be understood as part of a household-wide strategy according to which, for example, children with less academic promise are removed from school in order to earn wages that may help to support the continued study of siblings. In other words, we need to locate decisions about education in relation to intra-household dynamics.

Larger political economic forces also profoundly affect the functioning of the household, a point that emerges clearly from the study by Katz of Howa village in Sudan, where diversification of roles was an essential response to economic restructuring provoked by neo-liberal reform (2004). Such reform, as I have suggested, reflects in turn cultural/ideological factors, in particular the assumption that households may be left to carry the burden of support for social reproduction, with a minimal role for the state. The extent to which policies informed by this view have impacted upon children's lives – fuelling or ameliorating childhood poverty - is an issue for empirical investigation. In seeking to comprehend this issue we must also pay attention to national institutions that play a mediating role between the IMF/World Bank and households. Even within the constraints of structural adjustment and PRSPs governments may respond with different degrees and kinds of support for households, again reflecting factors of culture/ideology and political economy.

Finally, we need solid data about the material realities of households within which processes of social reproduction occur. The quality of housing; the standard and cost of utilities such as water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications; the proximity of basic services are just some of the dimensions to be considered.

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As this paper has attempted to show, much remains to be learned about the ways that childhood poverty is created and perpetuated. One point should be clear, however: our efforts to understand the dynamics of childhood poverty must be removed from narrow discussion of technicalities and relocated within a properly political framework that takes full account of power relations within the global economy. In order to do this we need to bring together diverse disciplines and integrate findings at the macro, meso and micro levels. No single perspective or set of tools can enable complete understanding of the complex forces creating childhood poverty. What are needed at this time are flexibility and collaboration to enable these diverse perspectives to work together. However, to ensure that findings translate into sustained economic improvement for emerging generations of the world's poor, we above all require political will. At a moment when global capitalism appears to have failed us all so badly, it may appear slightly less naive than previously believed to hope that we can muster sufficient support to ask the difficult questions and compel the necessary changes.

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